

Analysis of Public Responses
to the Draft Commercial Services Plan
and Environmental Assessment
for
Acadia National Park

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Executive Summary

In response to the Draft Commercial Service Plan (DCSP) issued by Acadia National Park in August, 1998, the park received 106 comments from 102 individuals, businesses and organizations interested in the management of commercial operations within Acadia National Park (ANP). Thirty-one of the responses specified a preferred alternative or combination of alternatives; however, most respondents limited their remarks to one or several issues of particular concern. Although topics discussed in the responses vary and although no alternative is overwhelmingly preferred, what was consistently stated is the need to change the way the park's commercial services are managed.

What Types of Services?

Whether or not the National Park Service (NPS) should allow the gift shops to remain in the park, and if so, in what form, generated the most response (88). Twenty-two respondents, including nine who identify themselves as having a financial interest in the current concession operation, advocated retaining all three gift shops; 66 respondents favored removing at least one gift shop, including 46 who would like to see *all* shops removed from the park. Thirty-four of those who would like to see the gift shops removed appear to have responded at the request of the National Parks and Conservation Association. Generally, those who felt the gift shops should remain indicated that the shops support the financial feasibility of the Jordan Pond House food and beverage service and provide tasteful merchandise at convenient locations to park visitors while providing emergency response and park information without cost to the NPS. In contrast, others stated that the shops are either unnecessary or not appropriate, or both. They wrote that the shops sell items that are available within a short drive of the park, items that are of poor quality or not essential to visitors, that the shops retain visitors at high use areas adding to congestion, and/or that the shops interfere with the enjoyment of the park. Sixteen respondents felt that one or more of the shops should be replaced with interpretive or education centers; 13 wrote that small bookstores would be appropriate. However, few specifically addressed the cost of staffing, maintaining or making improvements to such facilities.

There were many suggestions about the types of items that would be appropriate to be sold within the park. Nineteen respondents favored selling items such as those currently sold at the gift shops, while seven wrote that sales items should include gifts that are even more closely related to park themes than what is currently would be appropriate, and 12 wrote that sales outlets should carry items necessary for health and safety or "bare essentials."

Retaining food and beverage services at the Jordan Pond House was favored by a majority of respondents (38 of 46), as was retaining two local bus tours (19 of 30), allowing recreational or educational operations administered by Individual Business Permits (30 of 31), and step-on guides (16).

Motorcoach tours were generally supported, although there was a wide variety of suggestions for managing them. Sixteen letters, six from bus operators, supported increasing bus use in ANP, arguing that bus tours make the park accessible to large numbers of people and that they can be managed to have minimal impact on park resources.

The DCSP generated much interest in bike and horse use and management within the park, although many of the responses did not apply specifically to commercial services and were not included in this analysis. Thirty-one respondents indicated that the livery and carriage ride services are appropriate. Five letters specifically mentioned improving services to day-use horse owners, reducing fees, and improving camping facilities and policies pertaining to equestrians who bring their horses to Wildwood Stables to access the carriage roads.

What Levels of Use?

Nearly every respondent agreed or implied that some type of management of commercial services use levels is appropriate, although they varied widely about how to best set commercial use levels. Eleven respondents indicated that commercial operators and visitors should continue to compete for facilities, 22 wrote that limits should be placed on the use of park facilities for commercial activities. Only one respondent felt that no park facilities should be used by commercial operators.

It was generally agreed that Incidental Business Permits (IBPs)s should be issued with limitations and restrictions to protect park resources and visitor experiences, although the severity of those restrictions and the suggested consequences of violating them varied.

How Managed?

There was little consensus about how many concessions contracts should be issued and which services, if any, could be effectively grouped under a single contract. Six respondents specifically mentioned that combining food and beverage services with horse operations would be a mistake. They noted that these businesses require very different management skills and/or that making necessary improvements to Wildwood Stables would be financially taxing to the concessioner.

Of the 29 respondents who addressed NPS staffing levels directly or by specifying a favored alternative, 28 indicated that more staff than is currently allocated is needed to manage commercial services to protect park values.

Of those who addressed the issue of training and/or certification of commercial operators, almost every one favors more, although there was little consensus on how much training should be required or what types of business should be professionally certified.

Thirty-one respondents specifically mentioned or implied by choosing an alternative that permit fees should recover administrative and monitoring costs. A majority of respondents (30) addressing this issue indicated that concession special accounts should pay for most, if not all, facility improvements. Of these, 17 respondents wrote that the NPS should partially or wholly subsidize those concessions deemed truly necessary and appropriate. Four others noted that if concessions are not financially self-sufficient, they should be discontinued.

Introduction

On August 5, 1998, the National Park Service released the Draft Commercial Services Plan and Environmental Assessment (DCSP) for Acadia National Park for public comment. Written copies of the plan were posted in local libraries and distributed to all known providers of commercial services and other interested persons who requested a copy. A copy of the plan was also posted on the park's internet site. The DCSP did not specify a preferred alternative, rather it provided a variety of alternatives, ranging from no action to severe restrictions, for many issues relating to commercial services management within the park.

A public workshop was held September 16, 1998 at the park's Visitor Center to discuss issues raised in the DCSP. At the workshop several people noted that the timing of the public comment period coincided with the busiest commercial season in the area, thus reducing their opportunity to comment. The park superintendent responded by extending the end of the public comment period from October 1 until October 31, 1998, for a total period of 89 days.

This document is intended to provide a summary of responses to the DCSP for park managers, members of the park's Advisory Commission, and other persons interested in commercial services management at Acadia National Park.

Who commented?

The park received 106 responses from 102 individuals, businesses and organizations interested in the management of commercial operations within Acadia National Park. Several respondents wrote more than once to clarify or add to their initial positions. The park also received more than 50 letters and postcards from equestrians and park neighbors concerning horse and bicycle use in the park; these were not included in this analysis of responses unless the comments directly applied to commercial operations addressed in the DCSP. A list of respondents is provided in Appendix 1.

Twenty of the respondents appear to have direct business interests within ANP, including thirteen who are concessioners or concession stockholders or directors, six incidental business permit holders, and Eastern National, a non-profit organization that manages sales outlets throughout the park. Thirty-four responses appear to have been made at the request of the National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA). In addition to a letter from NPCA, we received comments from Friends of Acadia, the Maine Chapter of the Sierra Club, the Maine Equine Advisory Council, the Seal Harbor Village Improvement Society, and the Footloose Friends, a local hiking group. The affiliations of some respondents is provided in Figure 1.

How were responses analyzed?

All letters commenting on any aspect of commercial services management within Acadia National Park and dated between August 5, 1998 and October 31, 1998 were included in the analysis of comments. We developed a table, with a wide range of typical comments, to record responses to a variety of issues, including several that were beyond the alternatives described in the DCSP.

Thirty-one of the respondents preferred a specific alternative; however, most who commented limited their remarks to one or several issues of particular concern. Those who commented on one or a few issues were tallied according to those issues only. Those respondents who identified being in favor of a specific alternative were tallied in *all* issues according to the alternative as outlined in the DCSP. Of those who identified a favored alternative, many preferred specific changes from how the alternative was put forth in the DCSP on one or several issues; all changes were tallied accordingly. Two letters were received which stated a general ideology about commercial services management without specifying a position on any particular issue. Rather than make assumptions about how the authors felt about a particular issue, we report these letters separately.

Several respondents provided comments based on positions taken by others, namely Friends of Acadia and Ed Winterberg, whose comments were publicized in the *Bar Harbor Times*. When a letter was received that simply indicated agreement with another party, it was tallied identically to the specified party.

Responses were tallied by Judith Hazen Connery and Charles Jacobi, both park employees and members of the ANP commercial services management planning team.

Results

Although topics discussed in the responses to the DCSP vary and although no alternative was overwhelmingly preferred, what is consistently stated is the need to change the way the park's commercial services are managed. A table summarizing the comments received by the NPS on the DCSP is provided in Figure 2.

What Types of Services?

Gift Shops

Whether or not the NPS should allow the gift shops to remain in the park, and if so, in what form, generated the most response (88 of 106). Twenty-two respondents, including nine associated with the current concessioner operating the shops, advocated retaining all three gift shops. Sixty-six, including 34 who appear to have responded at the request of the NPCA, supported eliminating one or more shops. Generally, those that felt the gift shops should stay indicated that the shops support the operation of the Jordan Pond House and provide tasteful and necessary merchandise at convenient locations to park visitors while providing emergency response and park information without cost to the NPS. In contrast, others stated that the shops are either unnecessary or not appropriate, or both. They wrote that the shops sell items that are available within a short drive of the park, items that are of poor quality or not essential to visitors, that the shops retain visitors at high use areas adding to congestion, and/or that the shops interfere with the enjoyment of the park.

Many alternatives were suggested by those who felt that only some of the gift shops should be closed. The most popular suggestion was to close Thunder Hole and Cadillac (eight), with a variety of other combinations or single closures recommended by a few. Nine favored retaining, but reducing the size of the Jordan Pond House shop.

Many respondents mentioned that shops should be replaced with educational or information centers; some felt that these centers could include small sales areas. However, few specifically addressed the cost of staffing, maintaining or making improvements to such facilities. A few respondents, including Friends of Acadia, strongly urge the park to convert the shops into museums and bookstores run by nonprofit enterprises such as Eastern National, which currently operates book sales areas at the Visitor Center and six other locations throughout the park. Eastern National indicated in its response that it is willing to assume a larger role in park operations. In contrast, another person suggested that if the shops are converted into book/map/info/ranger aid posts, a concessioner should operate them, as well as existing Eastern National sales outlets, if the concessioner could return more money than Eastern National into the park.

Sales Items

Many people suggested the types of items that they felt would be appropriate to be sold within the park. Nineteen respondents favored selling items such as those currently sold at the gift shops, while seven respondents felt that sales items should be more closely related to park themes. Eighteen letters indicated that books or educational materials would be appropriate, and 15 wrote that sales outlets should carry items necessary for health and safety or “bare essentials.” There seemed to be little agreement on what would be considered “essential”; items commonly mentioned included those that would be used or consumed in the park prior to returning to local towns, such as trail maps, rain ponchos, snacks and beverages, film, and first aid supplies.

Jordan Pond House

Retaining food and beverage services at the Jordan Pond House was favored by a majority of respondents (38 of 46). Comments in favor of the current offerings there cited the opportunity to enjoy part of the cultural heritage of Acadia, and the quality of operations. Five respondents wrote that the size and scope of the food and beverage service at Jordan Pond House should be reduced. Three others felt that the Jordan Pond House had significantly changed from what was offered there traditionally, and that it should be eliminated.

Livery and Carriage Rides

A majority of responses favor continuing carriage rides at Wildwood Stables (31 of 32). Five letters specifically mentioned improving services to day-use horse owners, reducing over-night use fees, and improving camping facilities and policies pertaining to equestrians who bring their horses to Wildwood Stables to access the carriage roads. Two responses suggested increasing the numbers of carriage rides offered at Wildwood Stable. Another person remarked that the stables serves few visitors and would best be operated outside park boundaries. One person felt that if the stables operation was determined to be necessary and appropriate, it should be operated by a non-profit organization.

Local Bus Tours

A majority of responses support retaining local bus tours (40 of 42); nineteen favor continuing to allow two bus concessioners while eleven felt that having only one concessioner would be preferable. Of those that preferred having two bus tour concessions, many suggested that having two tour operators would encourage better service at more competitive prices.

Motorcoach Tours

Motorcoach tours were generally supported, although there was a wide variety of suggestions for managing them. Sixteen respondents, six from bus operators, supported motorcoach use in ANP, arguing that bus tours make the park accessible to large numbers of people, including the elderly and cruise ship visitors, with minimal negative effect on park resources or other visitors. Four respondents described buses as being inappropriate in the park because they deposit a large number of visitors at one spot, take up considerable space in parking lots, produce fumes and noise, or are generally unsightly. One person suggested that buses be banned from the Cadillac Mountain Road and the Park Loop Road, and another requested that shuttles up Cadillac be smaller, gasoline-powered vehicles. In contrast, two persons suggested access to Cadillac Mountain during peak summer periods be allowed only by bus.

Step-On Guides

Relatively few respondents addressed the issue of using certified guides. Of those that mentioned guides, sixteen were in favor of this service being offered. Six mentioned that step-on guides should be offered training and ten that guides should be NPS certified. Two suggested that guides should be managed by a concession who also would manage all motorcoach IBPs.

Other Comments

Six comments were received encouraging the park to integrate commercial policies with transportation and fee planning.

Two letters were received that did not comment specifically on any issues within the DCSP, but suggested that commercial services should be severely restricted, if not eliminated, from the park. These letters were not included in the matrix because we did not want to speculate where the authors would stand on any particular issue.

What Levels of Use?

How to Set Use Levels

Nearly every respondent mentioned or implied that some type of management of commercial services use levels was appropriate, although they varied widely about how commercial activities could best be managed. About equal numbers felt that professional judgement should be used (nine) versus a quantitative, scientific process (seven), and four indicated that the NPS should use *both* methods to determine acceptable levels of commercial use. In addition, ten respondents wrote that a carrying capacity for commercial use should be set.

Allocation of Facilities

Eleven respondents indicated that commercial operators and visitors should continue to compete for facilities; sixteen that limits should be placed on the use of park facilities for commercial activities, and six that strong preference should be given to allowing individuals preferential use of facilities over commercial uses. One person clearly stated that they felt that no facilities in the park should be used by commercial operators.

Several people commented about crowding, congestion and conflicts at or near the Jordan Pond House. Two people mentioned that the signs at Jordan Pond House asking hikers to park at the lower lot were offensive.

Restrictions on IBP Activities

Most respondents mentioned or implied that incidental business permits should be issued with limitations and restrictions to protect park resources and visitor experiences, although the severity of those restrictions and the suggested consequences of violating them varied. At least two IBP holders wrote to say that the park needs some method to weed out irresponsible IBP holders--that one or two bad operators can spoil the reputation of many who offer similar services. One local kayak tour guide would like to have the park require all operators to write a specific, detailed minimum impact policy that would be submitted to the park as part of the IBP application process. At least two respondents mentioned that commercial operators should lose the ability to operate in the park, either for a short term or forever, if found in violation of permit conditions.

Limits on Numbers of IBPs Issued

Although the DCSP explains that it is currently against NPS guidelines to limit the number of IBPs issued for any activity deemed appropriate within Acadia, the park received ten comments that NPS guidelines should be changed in this regard.

How managed?

Concessions Contracts

There was little consensus about how many concessions contracts should be issued and which services, if any, could be effectively grouped under a single contract. Six respondents specifically mentioned that combining food and beverage services with horse operations would be a mistake. They noted that these businesses require very different management skills and/or making necessary improvements to Wildwood Stables would be financially taxing to the concessioner. Two respondents, both shareholders in Acadia Corp, explained that at one time, the corporation operated a stable across the road from the Jordan Pond House. "This was not a profitable business as it required different skills from operating a restaurant and gift shops as well as requiring the off-season care and feeding of the horses," wrote one respondent.

Motorcoaches

There were many comments, and great disparity, about managing motorcoaches, ranging from imposing severe restrictions to encouraging bus use through lower fees and allowing greater flexibility. One of the main concerns articulated in comment letters is that buses flood an area with visitors, increasing pedestrian congestion. Sixteen letters, including those from Friends of Acadia, the National Parks and Conservation Association, and the Sierra Club of Maine, favor restricting bus use in the park by limiting bus numbers and size and/or setting a carrying capacity for motorcoach tours. They also favor limiting bus access to certain times of day and/or specific geographical areas in the park.

In contrast, an operator of escorted tours using motorcoaches states, “We strongly oppose limits on motorcoach visitation. Such measures would tend to discourage and in some cases eliminate elderly visitors from the park.....” They continue, “A permitting system for coaches with limited permits would be devastating to small operators like us, as it is nearly certain that virtually all available slots would be claimed by large operators or repeated departure tours.”

Suggestions by tour bus operators to make the park more friendly to motorcoach and local bus tours include:

- Not requiring a lengthy permit application process
- Lowering the entrance fee for motorcoaches from \$150 to \$100
- Lowering the entrance fee at nonpeak times of day
- Offering a discount to buses that carry a NPS-certified guide
- Having a more lenient fee structure for local bus companies
- Not limiting the number of permits issued to tour companies

Several respondents suggested eliminating the present policy of issuing IBPs to individual touring companies; “Frankly, it just isn’t working,” wrote one tour operator. They go on to suggest, as did another respondent, that the park issue one concession contract for motorcoaches; “It would be a lot easier to either have the concessionaire hold the liability insurance, or administer IBP’s to local guides, as opposed to the multitudes of motorcoach companies.” Another letter requested that the concessioner be a member of the American Bus Association or the National Tour Association.

Recovery of Administrative and Monitoring Costs

Thirty-one respondents specifically mentioned or implied by choosing an alternative that permit fees should recover administrative and monitoring costs. Thirteen indicated that concession special accounts should pay for *all* facility improvements; 17 that the concession special accounts should pay for *most* facility improvements. Eight respondents wrote that the NPS should partially or wholly subsidize those concessions deemed necessary and appropriate if they were not financially feasible. Several others noted that if concessions are not financially self-sufficient, they should be discontinued.

IBP Fees

Seven respondents suggested that IBP fees should be set recognizing the size and scope of the commercial operation being permitted. It was suggested that fee schedules be developed in a public process that includes businesses regulated by IBPs, the local business community and park managers. The Seal Harbor Village Improvement Society suggested that a percentage of funds collected from kayak IBPs should be donated to them to compensate for the adverse effects that kayak launches have on Seal Harbor Beach.

NPS Staffing Levels

Of the 29 respondents who addressed NPS staffing levels directly or by favoring one alternative over another, 28 indicated that more staff than is currently allocated should be provided to manage commercial services to protect park values.

Training/Certification

Training and/or certification of commercial operators was favored by a majority of commenters, although, like many issues raised by the DCSP, there was little consensus on how much training should be required or what types of businesses should be professionally certified. Three respondents indicated that step-on guides should pay any costs for becoming certified.

Conclusion

Although there is a wide range of public opinion about how commercial services should be managed at Acadia National Park, there is a clear mandate for the National Park Service to develop a long-term strategy to protect park resources and the experiences of park visitors from too much or inappropriate commercial activity. Exactly what those visitor experiences should be--for example, whether shopping for gifts within the park should be continued or eliminated, is more controversial.

During the public comment period for the DCSP, the Omnibus Park Management Act of 1998 was passed by Congress and signed into law November 13, 1998; this legislation will affect how commercial services are managed at Acadia and all National Park Service units. For example, the legislation discontinues the practice of favoring NPS concessions contract holders, who do more than \$500,000 per year in business, when concessions contracts are renewed. Another important change is the way the law requires the NPS to establish a minimum acceptable concessions contract bid, "or other forms of consideration to the government." The law allocates 80 percent of collected franchise fees to the NPS unit collecting the money "for visitor services and for purposes of funding high-priority and urgently necessary resource management programs and operations." The other 20 percent will go to the National Park System as a whole for similar purposes.

Another important change, may be the way IBPs are handled. In the past, parks could not limit the number of permits issued for any activity deemed appropriate. Under new regulations, IBPs may be limited, although at this time, no one knows for certain how this will be accomplished.

Other changes will result from the new legislation; however, it will take an unknown period of time for the National Park Service to promulgate new regulations related to commercial services management. In the meantime, the National Park Service will move forward to manage commercial services at Acadia National Park in such a way as to fulfill the park's mission.